

## **Japanese Buddhist Youths and Their Struggles with Violence in the Military before and during WWII:**

### **The Case of Hirose Akira (1919–47)**

Previous research has already contributed to exposing the extent of Japanese Buddhist leaders' ethical responsibility in collaborating with the state's war effort. This paper rather examines the struggles of ordinary lay Buddhist youths who had to deal with war and militarism during WWII. I will focus on the case of an unknown young Shinshū Buddhist soldier, Hirose Akira. While on military duty, Hirose kept writing diaries about his inner journey. I will explore his diaries and show how—despite the Shinshū leaders' pro-war stance and their prominent preacher Akegarasu Haya's war propaganda—one young Shinshū Buddhist struggled for his faith, denounced military violence, and reached a point where his own understanding of Shinshū and Buddhism as a whole underwent a complete transformation.

Hirose Akira 廣瀬明 (1919–1947) was born the son of a priest of a Shinshū Ōtani-ha temple in Gifu prefecture and was also expected to become a priest. When Hirose was young, he lost his father and mother and had to take care of his younger brother. Later, in 1939, at the age of 19, he studied at Ōtani University in Kyoto to become a priest. At that time, Japan was already at war with China and the entire society was mobilized for war. After Japan entered the war with the U.S. on December 7, 1941 (U.S. time), university students were also mobilized. One way to draft them early was to force them to graduate before they had completed their curriculum.

Hirose was drafted into the military in February 1942, at the age of 23, and came back home in January 1945. After having returned, Hirose became a priest of the temple in his hometown, where he created a Buddhist youth group and opened a library for the youth at the temple. Based on his new ideas about Buddhism, he cultivated land for the community farm to

help the farmers' lives and endeavors. However, due to his physical weakness, the exhaustion from his time in the army, and his hard work in the community, Hirose died on December 20, 1947 at the age of 28.

Hirose Akira constantly wrote diaries about his inner journey. After his death, his younger brother Hirose Takashi 廣瀬 卓 (1924–2011) published these writings under the title “The Diary of a Youth Who Seeks the Truth” (*Wakaki Kyūdōsha no Nikki* 若き求道者の日記) in 1970.<sup>1</sup> Hirose's diaries are precious documents that allow us to discover how one young True Pure Land Buddhist faced the war—his struggle for faith, survival, and the transformation of his understanding of Shinshū and Buddhism as a whole deserve special attention.

Hirose's diaries consist of two parts; the first part includes the period of time when he was a student at Ōtani University from November 1939 to January 1942; the second part includes his military and priestly life, after having returned from his deployment in the army, from February 1942 until August 1946.

### **Hirose Akira's Vitalism (*Seimeishugi* 生命主義)**

With the understanding that he was born to be a priest, Hirose came to Ōtani University to learn about what he was supposed to believe in as a future representative of his denomination. Yet he did not feel any joy about what he learned, and he witnessed how his fellow students also looked devoid of spiritual conviction. However, after having learned from Professor Kaneko Daiei 金子大栄 (1881–1971) and Soga Ryōjin 曾我量深 (1875–1971), Hirose came to realize that all the teachings of Shinran and Gautama Buddha were meant to find one's true self and the preciousness of each and every moment of one's life, i.e., “vitalism.” Hirose stated:

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<sup>1</sup> Akira Hirose, *Wakaki Kyūdōsha no Nikki* (The Diary of Youth Who Seeks Truth) (Tokyo, Japan: Yayoishobō, 1970)

I am not interested in becoming a researcher of Shinran but I want to live according to the principle of life which Shinran himself had lived up to. I have no time and energy left other than cultivating my life..... I do not want to offer my life to an idolized and objectified Shinran or criticize Shinran with cold rationality. I want to get directly into the life of Shinran itself (8/29/1941).<sup>2</sup>

Hirose's vitalism sounds similar to that of Akegarasu. In fact, Hirose listened to Akegarasu when he visited Ōtani University in July 1941. Unlike Akegarasu's evangelistic vitalism for war propaganda, Hirose's vitalism was more pure and personal; in addition, his young critical mind was much sharper than Akegarasu's.

During his time at the university, Hirose was critical of the military training performed there. When the military trainers asked students to write about how Shinshū belief contributed to becoming a good subject of the emperor, Hirose wrote back that the best contribution of Shinshū would be to follow one's own inner life. (12/6/1940).

Hirose was not happy that his religious institution was following a nationalistic trend and that the institution was apologetic to the ultranationalists who accused Shinshū of being anti-*kokutai* (national polity) and irresponsibly escapist. The Shinshū acknowledged these accusations with two main responses. First, Shinshū-honganji-ha 真宗本願寺派 (one of branches of Shinshū) established The Center for Research of Japanese Teachings and Doctrines (*Nihon Kyōgaku Kenkyūsho* (日本教学研究所) in May, 1941 and eventually created The Leading Headquarters for the War Time Teachings and Doctrines (*Senji-Kyōgaku Shidō Honbu* 戦時教学指導本部) in May 1944.<sup>3</sup> Second, on April 5, 1940, the Shinshū-Honganji-ha voluntarily expunged critical passages from Shinran's most important texts, the *Kyōgyōshinshō* 教行信証, which included a passage saying, "Do not worship the emperor, parents and *kami* when you

<sup>2</sup>Hirose, p.73. Terasawa's translation. Hereafter, I will put include only the precise date of Hirose's diaries, instead of the page number.

<sup>3</sup>Gyōshin Ikeda, *Shinshū Kyōdan no Shisō to Kōdō* (Kyoto, Japan: Hōzōkan 1997), p.162.

have a real faith in the *Tathāgata* and in Amida Buddha.” It is important to note that such censorship by the Shinshū authority was done without coercion from the government.

Nonetheless, Hirose insisted that True Pure Land Buddhists must stick to Shinran’s non-worship of Shinto *kami* (*Jingi-fuhai*) as an expression of the sharp negation of materialistic desire, which had invited the *kami* and shamanistic deities (6/28/1941; 7/31/1941). For Hirose, the True Pure Land Buddhists should not forget their transcendental view of this world, while also avoiding the desire to escape it. They should truly face up to the reality of the sinful self and hell on earth. He considered that, by digging into one’s dark self, one can find true life-vitality, which manifests the grace of the ultimate (*Nyorai* 如来) (1/17/1940; 5/6/1941; 9/16/1941).

Even when Hirose was a student, he was worried about the state’s suppression of free criticism at universities, which he believed would eventually lead to the death of the nation’s culture. Hirose came to realize that Shinran was a person who was able to be critical of himself and of society without being cynical. Thus, the True Pure Land Buddhists must return to the original life-vitality of Shinran himself, going beyond an abstract ideology of ultranationalism or Marxism, both of which were not grounded in the ultimate life of the self (10/2/1941).

Hirose was able to point out the hypocrisy behind the totalitarian war mobilization in the name of public service. He wrote:

Nowadays, people are talking about totalitarianism to which individual desire must be subordinated. This is dangerous if it is applied to social policy. Behind this totalitarian policy, there is another kind of selfish desire. The individual will and desire exist before any ideologies. (9/17/1940) The state asked religious leaders to cooperate with the state’s moral suasion campaign for the war. Unless you establish your true self, the moral suasion has no meaning. We must return to the original mind seeking the truth. (9/18/1940)

Moreover, Hirose criticized the slogans of the army, pointing out its selfish desire for expansionism (4/46/1941).



Nonetheless, Hirose was engaging in the pursuit of a true self through the study of Buddhism at the university. Hirose wrote about his life dream:

My life's dream would be: First of all, in a quiet countryside, I would like to do a modern translation of Buddhist classics. Nowadays, those classics are confined to the denominational ivory tower. Those classics are abandoned as lifeless antiques. A translation is not just a change from one language to another. This is my work to translate those Buddhist classics to revive their life-vitality now, according to Shinran's attitude of finding the life-vitality of the classics with his sincere pursuit of the true ground of self. (10/6/1944)

However, after the war between Japan and the U.S. broke out on December 7, 1941, Hirose and all the Japanese students had to change their life dreams, since the Japanese government decided to mobilize all students, except those in science and technology, by forcing them to graduate earlier in order to become soldiers and join the war effort.

Hirose graduated on December 26, 1941 with a graduation thesis titled "The Way of Shinran's Negation (*Shinranshōnin no hiteidō* 親鸞聖人の否定道)." He then joined the 11<sup>th</sup> Regiment in the city of Toyohashi 豊橋 on February 1, 1942.

### **Hirose Akira's faith in the struggle against authoritarian militarism in the army**

Contrary to what might be expected, at the beginning of his duty in the army, Hirose sincerely accepted life in the army. First of all, he saw how all social and educational backgrounds had become irrelevant. Everyone was considered equal. Hence, it would be an opportunity to know one's true self, as well as to create genuine relationships with all kinds of people. Second, all the knowledge about Buddhism he had learned at the university could be put to the test. Third, his faith could be strengthened and challenged, and the reality of his self-vitality could be observed while he was being placed in a life or death situation. Finally, Hirose believed that he could contribute to the nation by offering his young energy and passion in the service of his country.

Though he was critical of the totalitarian trend of Japan during his time as a student, Hirose gradually tried to accept the reality of war as an individual and collective fate (4/10/1943). In other words, Hirose tried to gain peace and freedom of mind in the midst of war through an understanding of spiritual training, without criticizing the war as foolish from an intellectually superior position (1/14/42).

Hirose was actually inspired by simple soldiers, born of the farmers' class, who helped him without any words and expected no praise. At the same time, he was depressed by the fact that the most selfish, animalistic instinct for survival was revealed in him and others in the army. Hirose often felt the knowledge he learned at the university was useless, and how it was just an idealistic, ungrounded faith (3/16/1942; 2/19/1943; 3/6/1943). Therefore, Hirose often considered dying passionately in the most desperate battle (12/19/1943).

In other respects, Hirose began to wonder why Japan was winning the war in 1942 since he could not find a real, burning patriotism inside any of the soldiers or people who heteronomously accepted the cold rules and orders from the government under fear of punishment; only large slogans existed (12/30/1942).

Moreover, it was amazing that Hirose read not only Buddhist classics, but also many western philosophers during his day off, such as Plato, Shelling, Fichte, Hegel, Nietzsche and Dostoevsky. In terms of patriotism, Hirose praised the ancient Greek cities where each citizen took ownership of the state; thus, the real patriotism emerged autonomously in each citizen (12/9/1942). At any rate, Hirose was influenced most by Shinran, Nietzsche, and Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎 (1870–1945). He often compared Shinran's notion of self with Nishida Kitarō's philosophy of self-realization by autonomous will as the supreme good found in Nishida's first book, *An Inquiry into Goodness* (*Zen no Kenkyū* 善の研究).

Hirose found that the state was not giving the real purpose and meaning of the war to the people, and from the point of inner, deepest conscience and reason, he wondered why the Japanese people must fight the war (12/9/1942; 10/3/1943; 10/20/1943). Hence, Hirose emphasized the significance of Buddhist faith, especially Shinran's concentration on the ultimate foundation of one's self (5/20/1944).

For this reason, Hirose again became critical of his own Shinshū denomination; the Shinshū was only concerned with an institutional survival by following the nationalistic trend and evangelizing for its own denominational expansion. The Shinshū was not taking responsibility for the ultimate and critical issues of life and society for fear of its own institutional risk. Hirose insisted that each Shinshū believer must throw out denominational pride and become independent as a naked individual bearing the burden of the fundamental issues of the society in this age (9/14/1943). It was surprising that Hirose was able to keep contemplating these essential issues of faith and society, while experiencing the grueling nature of army life.

At the time he joined the army, Hirose sincerely believed that the military might be the place for his own spiritual training. However, after 1943, when Japan experienced continuous defeats in battles, many contradictions and problems within the military were revealed. Hirose could not stand the appalling selfishness of senior army leaders who kept their comfort by ordering junior soldiers to make sacrifices in the name of public service. Senior leaders privately enjoyed privileges of food for themselves, while the frontline soldiers were starving (4/16/1944). Moreover, it was most disturbing for Hirose that many senior leaders enjoyed punishing junior soldiers privately, relieving their own feelings of anger and frustration, without legitimate, lawful, clear reasons, or evidence (5/2/1944).

Hirose realized that Japan's defeat was inevitable long before the end of the war. He clearly witnessed the inner, and ethical collapse of the authoritarian, heteronomous systems ingrained in the military, and even society, due to the suppression of individual's autonomous will and passion. The leaders did not care for, or love the frontline soldiers and enjoyed using their high positions for their own private gains in the name of patriotism. They ordered and punished the lower ranks who could not freely state any opinions as a result of their fear of punishment. Hirose stated:

How ugly our leaders are! Even the generals of one army section are enjoying themselves under the lights during an air raid (during air raids, turning off all lights was the military order). The section leaders are taking 100 pieces of candy for their children while each soldier is given only one every month. All soap is taken by the section leaders to their families and they carried cakes of soap by car, using gasoline whose value was equivalent to human blood at that time. Such a ridiculous thing must exist!? Japan is already defeated whether winning the battle or not. Japan has already collapsed by her own people's ego and selfishness. Therefore the old Japan is dead now. I hope this is the sign before the new dawn! (12/8/1944).

Hirose was eventually discharged on January 15, 1945, before the end of the war. Subsequently, he returned to his hometown in Gifu prefecture, became a priest, and married.

### **Transformation of Hirose's faith, perspectives on Buddhism and practices**

During Hirose's three-year army duty, he was able to redefine his faith and perspectives on Buddhism. Thus, Hirose tried to practice what he found during the war as a True Pure Land Buddhist priest. When Japan eventually declared the surrender on August 15, 1945, Hirose strongly stated:

The final time has come. Who could predict it four years ago? We are defeated. We can find the true naked selves. Stop the big slogans. We now find that we had nothing other than selfish egotism from the beginning of the war. At this moment, we must look at ourselves honestly, then, with this self-awakening, we are able to rise up from the ashes (8/22/1945).

After the war, the many social problems, such as lack of food, poverty, and people's disillusionment, were prevalent and overwhelming. In that situation, Hirose wondered how he, a supposedly spiritual leader, could start practicing his beliefs and faith. The people, under such suffering, tended to seek the Pure Land as an imagined comfortable other-world, as a hope to escape from confronting difficult reality. However, Hirose rejected the imaginatively, objectified Pure Land. Rather, he emphasized the total transcendence of Pure Land without images of Pure Land. Moreover, instead of escaping to the other-worldly Pure Land, he stressed confronting both our suffering in the true reality and our self at the bottom of ourselves. Ultimately, in the midst of suffering and wondering, there is a voice of yearning for liberation; that is the voice of *Tathāgata* (Nyorai 如来). Hirose stated:

Buddhism is not forms and rituals as an objectified image or belief, but the principle or the ground of life itself. It is not our life style or forms but our attitude to life itself. Abandon chanting (*Nembutsu*)! Abandon Shinran! Listen to the voice of the ground of yourself and your existence! (2/13/1945).

This thought process is neither wholly transcendental nor wholly immanent. Rather, Hirose's unique immanent transcendentalism is significant. Furthermore, Hirose often felt there was a barrier between the priesthood and the people. In light of this belief, he wanted to be totally independent as a genuine individual of faith. He said:

I want to abandon temple and priesthood to live naturally. I want to talk to the heart of people as a naked individual freely. I hate my temple background. Ghosts with beautiful Buddha's images, which were actually Demon, threatened me and tempted me (3/31/1945).

For these reasons, Hirose decided to convert a section of his temple into a library, so the people could have unrestrained access to the classics and other books. Hirose planned to return to Ōtani University to fulfill his life dream, translating the Buddhist classics to further increase the accessibility of the classics for the people. The manifestations of his conviction did not stop

there, as Hirose also organized youth groups to study together. Furthermore, under the most difficult poverty the people experienced in the post-war situation, Hirose worked hard with the youth groups to cultivate the land and forests within the temple's property, as new farms for community cooperatives.

However, due to his physical weakness from his army experience and hard work cultivating the land, Hirose became ill and died on December 20, 1947 at the age of 28, leaving a wife and a one-year-old son. In the last paragraph in his diary, Hirose's immanent vitalism was stated:

To listen to the pledge of *Tathāgata (Nyorai)* is to be awakened with your real inner voice. If there is some belief, there is still doubt. If there is separation between *Tathāgata (Nyorai)* and myself, as well as believing and belief, it is not true faith. *Tathāgata (Nyorai)* is myself and myself is *Tathāgata (Nyorai)*. (8/30/1946).

While actively participating in and engaging with the society and the lives of people, he wanted to keep the total transcendence of the Pure Land as a criterion for being self-critical, as well as being critical of society. Accordingly, his understanding of Pure Land faith was something that went beyond the dichotomy called *Shinzoku-nitai*, the traditional Shinshū distinction between ultimate truth (*Shintai*) and conventional truth (*Zokutai*), respectively considered as the manifestation of the Tathāgata and of Amida Buddha. Hirose also went beyond another Shinshū's mind-body dualism in which the mind belongs to the Pure Land in the inner private realm and the body belongs to the conventional truth in the outer public realm. If he had lived longer, Hirose would have undoubtedly developed the True Pure Land social ethics in post-war Japan, contributing to the reform of Buddhism and society. Hirose's unfulfilled dream is left for us.

Moreover, it is quite likely that there were thousands of those like Hirose Akira,

unknown, young, conscientious Buddhist soldiers, who struggled with the intersection of their Buddhist principles and the violence of war. Even so, once the war started, it was difficult to resist the war as an individual, both in speech and action. Nevertheless, Hirose's story elicits us the critical question of whether the collective actions of Shinshū or Japanese Buddhism could have stopped or resisted starting of the war. Ultimately, we will not easily know the answer to the question, yet the story of this young, brilliant, and prophetic Buddhist soldier reminds us that should the opportunity for a collective, faith-based resistance of the violence of war arise again in the future.